

Septuagesima 2017

“For with thee is the well of life and in thy light shall we see light” Psalm 36.9

Let there be light! With some wistfulness we have just finally taken down the last of our sparkling Christmas decorations; we have celebrated Candlemas and turned from the Incarnation to towards the Passion; and the Old Testament takes us right back to the beginning of the story: let there be light!

As if by magic, a large banner, entitled “LIGHT!” has appeared in church. It is the work of some of the older children from our school, and was part of the recent Christian Unity celebrations at the Cathedral, when we were reflecting on our relationship with God’s created order. It is good for us to have this on display just now, as we begin this season of preparation for Easter. How often do we long for illumination, for light for our paths, our conversations, our decisions? To see and know the right way? Christ is the light of the world, and right at the beginning of that world, God created light. In the dark we bump into things, we take wrong turns, we end up in the wrong place, we mistake the outlines of objects and they are not always what we think they are. The General Synod of the Church of England needs light at the moment-illumination-as it prepares to grapple with the House of Bishops’ Report on Human Sexuality. Clearly even the very language of the conversation is deeply politicized and something that can cause great offence. We need to read carefully what has actually been said, rather than what people *say* has been said. I hope some of us may want to meet soon to reflect on this together....so, here we are poised at the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the Church: Septuagesima, seventy days before Easter.

So, what exactly is Septuagesima- the first of the three intriguingly named ‘gesima Sundays? These are a very special and ancient opportunity to change gear from the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle into the Lent-Passiontide-Easter cycle: the two great seasons of the year. In the first we celebrate the coming of God into our midst, the manifestation, the Incarnation, the Epiphany. In the second cycle we consider the working out of our salvation in Jesus Christ. The ‘gesimas are a season of grace that leads us from the light of the star, from the twinkling of crib and tree, to the bare, desertscape of spiritual warfare, to the way of the cross, to the glory of the empty tomb. It isn’t yet Lent, but there are clear elements of transition; in hymn, in colour, in text, in chant. It is a time in which we are bidden to prepare to undertake the journey of Lent, to ask God to restore our sight, to help us see things as they really are. And surely that is a critical aspect of our Christian journey together? Learning to see one another as God sees us-rather than as we would see one another? Discerning the likeness of Christ in our brothers and sisters.

As we embark on this season together, I would like us to keep two principles uppermost in our hearts and minds: firstly, the foundational Christian principle that God has created absolutely everything, beginning with the light. As a schoolboy, I was a keen photographer. The first time I experienced the absolute dark of the developing room was the first time I had ever been unable to see anything, not even the outline of my own hand: absolutely no light whatsoever. From the creation of light right through to the fashioning of the most complex modern technology: all is of God-even if it is mediated by the cunning ingenuity of man. Whatever the truth about the causes of climate change, about dwindling supplies of fossil fuels, about overpopulation, about disease and disaster: everything is in his hands. It’s good to zero the trip and return to this principle today, as we arrive at the top of the slope that leads us to Lent, Passiontide and Easter. Our Christian faith recognizes that nothing lies outside the scope of God’s concern and care.

Secondly: God doesn’t want us to walk in the dark, stumbling, falling, taking wrong turns. He isn’t waiting for us to find the answer to the impossible riddle. He longs for us to come home to him, and to this end he gives us many opportunities and means to hear his word and to learn his ways. Even if we come in at the eleventh hour, like those labourers in the vineyard, we are welcomed.

This isn’t to say that it is all plain sailing: there is the small matter of our human frailty and our great capacity to be aware of the good that we would do but...but....somehow....well, perhaps tomorrow will do just as well. Or next week or next year. And then a decade or two or five slip past. I say this first to myself.

We are his creatures, together with everything else around us: he sees us and knows us and loves us more than we can ever know or imagine. He longs for us to return to him and to his ways because he knows, in ways that most of us only ever glimpse fleetingly in our lifetime, that this really is for our best flourishing and fulfillment-to use that rather overused modern term. We will be most *fulfilled* when we are most closely aligned with his loving purposes. May this time of the ‘gesimas be a time when we discover afresh what shape those purposes take for each one of us and for us as a parish together. Amen.

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